



Auteur Theory

The aims of this Factsheet are:

- Explain Auteur Theory.
- Explore some of the criticisms of the theory.
- Provide some case studies.

Introduction

In most art forms, it is usually pretty straightforward to say who created a work. *Romeo and Juliet* was written by William Shakespeare, the *Mona Lisa* was painted by Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was written by... Beethoven. In all these cases, the author of the work is clear and generally not disputed. However, can the same be said to apply to films? We are used to discussing films as the work of the director – we talk about Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* or Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* – but there are plenty of other people whose work is vital to the successful creation of a feature film. Screenwriters, Art Directors, Editors, Cinematographers, Composers are all essential, so why do we generally only talk about Directors?

In his book "Adventures in the Screen Trade" the screenwriter William Goldman sums up the argument in relation to *Jaws* as follows:

Peter Benchley reads an article in a newspaper about a fisherman who captures a forty-five hundred pound shark off the coast of Long Island and he thinks, "What if the shark became territorial and it wouldn't go away?" And eventually he writes a novel on that notion and Zanuck-Brown buy the movie rights, and Benchley and Carl Gottlieb write a screenplay, and Bill Butler is hired to shoot the movie, and Joseph Alves, Jr designs it and Verna Fields is brought in to edit and, maybe most importantly of all, Bob Mattey is brought out of retirement to make the monster. And John Williams composes perhaps his most memorable score.

How in the world is Steven Spielberg the "author" of that?"



Steven Spielberg did a great job directing "Jaws", but can he be said to be the author of the film?

<https://assets.mubi.com/images/film/101972/image-w856.jpg?1354984263>

What is Auteur theory?

During the 1940s, most American films were products of the studio system, a highly-organised method of production where the director was, by and large, just another paid employee. The director's job was to take the script, written by the screenwriter, and run the filming process in order to shoot the material needed to assemble the final film. This material would be handed on to the editor who would put the film together while the director usually went off to shoot another film. Each individual had a job to do in the process and tended not to get involved in the work of other departments.



The set of *Now Voyager* (1942). Even for a small scene, a lot of people are required for the shoot

<https://silverscreenings.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/filming-of-now-voyager-1942.jpg>

During the second world war, it was not possible to see foreign films in France due to the German occupation which meant that in the years following the war, a backlog of several years' worth of Hollywood movies arrived in France all at once. Young, enthusiastic film critics from the French film magazine, *Cahiers du Cinema* (including Jean Luc Godard and François Truffaut) would frequent the cinemathèque in Paris where they could watch several films back to back every day.

When watching several films by the same director in quick succession, the Cahier critics found that they could identify themes and techniques that were present in the films of specific directors. The Cahier critics argued that certain directors were able to impose their own vision on a film through their use of *mise en scène* and camera, even though they were working from material selected for them by the studio. They argued that directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock had a distinctive style that came through in all of their films and they called these directors **auteurs**.

For the Cahiers critics, not all directors were auteurs, only those who were able to impose a particular vision on the films they directed qualified for the title. Some directors were considered to be **metteurs en scène**, competent interpreters of the ideas of other people but lacking the personal vision of an auteur. Some directors didn't even qualify for the title *metteur en scène*, these would be directors who played their part in the Hollywood system, churning out formulaic genre films without adding anything of interest of their own.

Activity: Look at the top 10 films at the box office and find out who directed each of them. Try and decide whether you consider each director to be an auteur, a *metteur en scène*, or just a director.

Alfred Hitchcock: Auteur

Hitchcock was a favourite of the Cahier critics, with Francois Truffaut completing an extensive interview with the director over several days in 1962 which resulted in the celebrated book “Hitchcock/Truffaut”. It is possible to identify several features that Hitchcock’s films have in common, and we might refer to these similarities as his “auteur signature”. A few features of Hitchcock’s auteur signature might include:

Voyeurism: Characters in Hitchcock often voyeuristically spy on other characters who do not know they are being watched. In *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates, uses a peephole to spy on Marion Crane undressing in her motel room, while the whole of *Rear Window* (1954) features James Stewart’s character observing his neighbours across the courtyard of his apartment building. Hitchcock often made use of point of view shots to put the audience themselves in the position of the voyeur.

Suspense: Hitchcock famously illustrated his approach to suspense with the example of a bomb under a table in a restaurant scene. If the audience remains unaware of the bomb, it comes as a shock when it finally explodes, but the preceding scene has been pretty dull. However, if the audience are made aware of the presence of the bomb, the scene becomes unbearably tense as we await the inevitable explosion. Hitchcock uses this to great effect in his film *Sabotage* (1936) where a young boy is given a package to deliver, requiring him to travel across London. The audience knows that the package contains a bomb, but the boy does not, so his dawdling to watch a procession and pet a dog becomes almost unbearably suspenseful.

Mistaken Identity: Many of Hitchcock’s plots revolve around a person being mistaken for somebody else, often throwing otherwise ordinary people into thrilling worlds of espionage or crime. In *North by Northwest* (1959), Cary Grant is mistaken for a non-existent CIA agent called Roger Thornhill, which leads him to be pursued across the USA, while in *The 39 Steps* (1935), the hero goes on the run after being falsely accused of murder.



François Truffaut interviewing the great auteur director Alfred Hitchcock in 1962

<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/hgAvkXH4dml/maxresdefault.jpg>

Activity: Choose a director that you consider to be an auteur and create a list of features that you consider to be key elements of their auteur signature. Be sure to illustrate your list with examples from their films. Read the “Exam Tip” section below for some ideas on directors that would be worth studying.

Exam Tip: Auteur theory is examined in A Level Film studies course as part of the following areas:

EDUQAS: *Hollywood Film 1930 to 1990 and Film Movements: Experimental Film.*

OCR: *Contemporary British and US Film.*

Some of the directors whose work features in these sections are listed below. They would make good case studies for the activity above. Speak to your teacher to clarify which directors you will be studying in class.

EDUQAS: Jean Luc Godard, Quentin Tarantino, Orson Welles, Nicholas Ray, Francis Ford Coppola, Spike Lee.

OCR: Ken Loach, Lynne Ramsey, J.J.Abrams, Christopher Nolan, Destiny Ekaragha, Alex Garland.

Case Study: Michael Curtiz

Michael Curtiz was one of the hardest working directors in the Hollywood studio system. He directed 102 films in Hollywood, in addition to the 64 he had already directed in Europe before moving to the USA. Among his best-known films are *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and, most famously, *Casablanca* (1942), which is a set film for the EDUQAS specification. If you are studying *Casablanca*, you will need to be prepared to answer questions relating to auteur theory, but even if you aren’t studying it, it is a useful introduction to the theory which you can then apply to your own case study films.

Casablanca was rushed into release in 1942 to capitalise on the publicity surrounding the Allied invasion of North Africa, which had taken place a few weeks earlier. Although not a box office smash at the time, the film did solid business and went on to win 3 Oscars (Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Director) for Curtiz. Its reputation has grown in the years and the film is now widely regarded as perhaps the greatest film produced by the classic Hollywood studio system. Under the studio system, stars, directors and hundreds of other essential creative people were under contract to specific studios and would work to churn out movie after movie, in a system resembling a factory production line.

Directors were generally not able to choose their own projects, rather they would be assigned to a particular production, although studios would know which directors were better suited to certain genres.



Michael Curtiz, director of *Casablanca* and many other Hollywood classics

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/87/Curtiz_1928_portrait.jpg/220px-Curtiz_1928_portrait.jpg

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Is Casablanca the work of an auteur? The American film critic Andrew Sarris (who popularised the idea of the auteur theory in the USA) described Casablanca as “the happiest of happy accidents, and the most decisive exception to the auteur theory”. However, some people have identified some characteristics of Michael Curtiz’s auteur signature in the film.

<p>For</p>	<p>Michael Curtiz was known for favouring sweeping camera moves, especially crane shots. The closing crane shot where the camera lifts away as Rick and Renault walk away together, is one example. Watch the final scene from the moment Rick, Ilsa, Victor and Captain Renault arrive at the airport and watch for the number of times the camera sweeps into a close-up of Rick and Ilsa to emphasise the turmoil of their final moments together.</p> <p>Low-Key lighting was used in several scenes and this is considered by many to be a key element of Curtiz’s visual style. Bars of shadow repeatedly fall across Victor and Ilsa when they visit the Blue Parrot in search of the letters of transit, implying entrapment or the crucifix, which was the symbol of the Free French Forces. Compare the use of shadow in two further shots from Casablanca and Curtiz’s “Captain Blood” from 1935.</p> <p>Curtiz favoured what he called “human interest” stories and Casablanca demonstrates this characteristic of his work. The film takes place against the backdrop of the war in North Africa, but the main thrust of the plot concerns the love affair between Rick and Ilsa. Rick has to decide whether to sacrifice his love for Ilsa for the greater good and it is this dilemma which provides the drama.</p> <p>Film historian Peter Wollen said that Curtiz’s films tended to portray characters who had to “deal with injustice, oppression, entrapment, displacement and exile.” Casablanca can certainly be said to feature all these themes. For example, Rick is American, living in self-imposed exile and displaced from Paris to Casablanca by the war. Rick’s sense of justice eventually leads him to help the resistance leader, Victor Laslo, even at the expense of his own happiness with Ilsa. All the supporting characters are in similar situations, and yearn to escape the entrapment of Casablanca.</p> <p><i>Image sources, Top to bottom:</i> https://josephagomez.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/casablanca1.jpg http://ia.media-imdb.com/images/M/MV5BMTc4MDk3ODE3NI5BMTI5BanBnXkFtZTYwMTU3MTM2.V1_SX450_SY340_.jpg http://deepfocusreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/captainblood4.jpg</p>	 <p>Lines of shadow form a cross on Victor Laslo</p>  <p>Casablanca, figure in shadow</p>  <p>Captain Blood, figure in shadow</p>
<p>Against</p>	<p>Hollywood has always worked with genres as a way of streamlining production and marketing. Films are expected to fit a set formula and the directors vision is secondary to the need to produce easily marketable products. Many of Casablanca’s themes would resurface again in another Warner Brothers film, To Have and Have Not (1944), in which Bogart again played a cynical American who finds the moral courage to fight injustice. The film was directed not by Curtiz but by Howard Hawks, and based on a novel by Earnest Hemmingway.</p> <p>The plot of the film cannot be attributed to Curtiz given that the story is based on the play “Everybody Comes to Rick’s” by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, who sold the rights to Warner Brothers after failing to attract a Broadway producer. The script was worked on by several writers, including the brothers Julius and Phillip Epstein and Howard Koch and it is these men who are responsible for the plot’s many memorable lines. “Here’s looking at you kid,” was improvised by Humphrey Bogart and was kept in the film.</p> <p>Film critic Roger Ebert described producer Hal Wallis as the “key creative force” behind Casablanca, for his attention to detail. Producers were often extremely-hands on in the studio system, regularly visiting sets and overruling directors on key details. Wallis regularly sent memos to the production, such as insisting that a real parrot be used outside the Blue Parrot bar and advising Curtiz on how to incorporate subtext into various scenes.</p> <p>In the studio system, directors would not have been involved in the development of a script or pre-production generally. Curtiz was the second-choice director, only getting the job as Wallis’ first choice, William Wyler was unavailable.</p>	

You will need to make up your own mind about how far you feel Casablanca can be considered the product of a single auteur. However, the words of the great film critic Andre Bazin are worth bearing in mind: “The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e., not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system.” The phrase, “the genius of the system” was used by Thomas Schatz as the title of his book about Hollywood, a book well worth seeking out if you would like to read more widely about this topic.

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Christopher Nolan: Auteur in Contemporary Hollywood

The studio system eventually crumbled, but Hollywood continues to be the source of the majority of the films we watch. The role of the director has changed a great deal since the days of the studio system, giving many directors significantly more power than they had in the past. One such director is Christopher Nolan, who has become one of the most powerful and successful directors working today and it can be argued that his work bears a distinctive auteur signature. His film, *Inception* (2010) is a set film on the EDUQAS A Level specification and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) is on the OCR specification.

Directors in contemporary Hollywood are far more likely to be involved much earlier in the development of a film. Often, they will select the subject matter for a film, usually by acquiring the rights to a book themselves. Nolan exercises even greater control over his films as he has written (or co-written) the screenplay for all the feature films he has directed to date. Rather than being assigned to films by the studio, directors are now hired on a film-by-film basis, giving them more freedom to pick and choose their projects.

Christopher Nolan: Auteur Signature**Complex Narrative Structure:**

Nolan's breakthrough film was "Memento" (2000) in which the central character struggles with amnesia to track down the man who murdered his wife. To simulate the amnesia he suffers from, the story is told in reverse so we see a situation and only later come to understand how the character came to be in it. Nolan has continued to make a habit of telling his stories using unconventional narrative structures, such as the 1 week, 1 day, 1 hour time frame in which the events of land, sea and air are related in *Dunkirk* (2017), or the multi-layered dream narrative of *Inception* (2010). Nolan's narratives often play with time, as can also be seen in "Interstellar" (2014), where the effects of gravity on the astronauts cause time to speed up for them, while other characters experience time at a different pace.



Director Christopher Nolan, a modern auteur?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Nolan#/media/File:Christopher_Nolan,_London,_2013_\(crop\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Nolan#/media/File:Christopher_Nolan,_London,_2013_(crop).jpg)

Regular Collaborators:

Auteur directors often assemble a regular team of collaborators around them. Nolan's films could be said to have a consistent visual style, although it should be noted that 7 of his films have been shot by his regular Director of Photography, Wally Pfister. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Ian Bukwalter describes Nolan's visual aesthetic as "characteristic rich colours, often present even in the deep shadows he also favors, juxtaposed with big, epic landscapes." Both Nolan and Pfister favour shooting on celluloid, rather than using the digital technology that many filmmakers are now using. Other regulars include the actors Michael Caine, Tom Hardy and Cillian Murphy, composer Hans Zimmer and editor Lee Smith.

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IMAX: Nolan is a champion of the huge images that are made possible by the IMAX format. IMAX uses 70mm film stock to produce incredibly detailed images, even when projected onto vast screens. Nolan has used IMAX cameras on many of his recent films. Several sequences in *The Dark Knight* were shot on IMAX and his use of the format has increased with an estimated 75% of *Dunkirk* being shot using IMAX cameras. IMAX versions of films can only be screened in special cinemas with huge screens and the correct projection equipment. The biggest IMAX screens are so big that they fill the peripheral vision of the audience, creating an immersive effect that Nolan has described this as "like virtual reality without the goggles."



These marketing images from *The Dark Knight* and *Dunkirk*, perfectly illustrate the "deep shadows juxtaposed with epic landscapes" aesthetic that Nolan is known for



http://images.mentalfloss.com/sites/default/files/dark_knight_hed.png?resize=1100x740

<http://www.indiewire.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/dunkirk.jpg>

Auteur Theory: Conclusions

The auteur theory has a contentious history. It has its supporters and detractors, but it has certainly had an impact on the way films are discussed in mainstream culture, with directors like Steven Spielberg and Christopher Nolan taking on star billing in the marketing of their films. We talk about "A Christopher Nolan Film" as if the film was the product of a single author, rather than the collaboration of hundreds of craftspeople. However, there are some key points to consider.

- Not all directors are auteurs. The Cahier critics suggested that some directors in the studio system (such as John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks) were able to impose a personal stamp on the films they directed, despite the control exerted over production by the studio.
- The auteur theory can arguably undermine a critic's ability to assess a film. Poor films by auteur directors can often be argued to be superior to excellent films by otherwise mediocre directors. Francois Truffaut defended this position in his essay of 1954, "Une certaine tendance du cinema Francais" in which he coined the phrase "la politique des auteurs". Truffaut said that "there are no good and bad movies, only good and bad directors."
- Auteur theory unfairly ignores the contribution of collaborators like Wally Pfister, whose contribution to the "look" of Christopher Nolan's films is considerable. Screenwriters, who may be the person who has actually devised the plot and themes of the film, are often completely ignored.
- Auteur theory ignores the other influences that contribute to the meaning of a film, such as the social and cultural context in which the film was produced, the influence of genre on many mainstream films and the production context a film was made in (such as the studio system).